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Drinkers at Work

Firms Act to Uncover The Secret Alcoholics, Make Them Get Help

**Desire to Hold On to Job
Is Called Strong Motive;
Efficiency Drop Is Signal**

Invasion of Privacy Feared

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Peter Sutherland spent 18 depressing months trying futilely to stop drinking. "I could make it for 90 days or so, and then I'd be on a plane and decide it was OK to have a drink. I'd end up going to Stuttgart when I should have been in Copenhagen—it got to be embarrassing," he recalls.

One day, Mr. Sutherland says, he returned to New York from a business trip, spent \$18 on a taxi ride to his suburban town so that he could arrive before the local liquor store closed, and went on a long drunk. Afterwards, a house painter he knew carried him off to a hospital for alcoholics.

"I arrived with great style and dignity, lying on a tarpaulin in the back of the truck with a fifth of Smirnoff in my hand," he says. "I woke up at 6 in the morning at this place in Connecticut. I didn't know how I got there. I looked out at the cyclone fencing, and I just knew I wanted it all to stop."

That was nine years ago and Mr. Sutherland says he hasn't had a drink since. "You just have to hit bottom," he says.

A Better Way

Mr. Sutherland also figured there had to be a better way of dealing with alcoholism, and now he is working at it. Two years ago, he and two other recovered alcoholics founded Sandin-Murray-Sutherland, Inc., a New York firm that uses a hard-headed approach to alcoholism counseling. Its clients are Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith Inc.; New Jersey's Public Service Electric & Gas Co.; and Marsh & McLennan Inc., the insurance concern.

Companies like these are trying a bold and controversial strategy: They are putting teeth in their alcoholism programs. Most corporate programs for problem drinkers still wait passively for a handful of obvious alcoholics to show up with jittery hands and bloodshot eyes. But a few dozen aggressive programs, mainly started in the last few years, try to ferret out the secret alcoholic as soon as his performance starts to slip, often years before jittery hands set in.

These programs offer every possible help in recovery—no gimmicks, just the standard methods such as residential rehabilitation centers and Alcoholics Anonymous—and usually threaten instant dismissal if the employee doesn't use

The more effective corporate programs are achieving remarkably good recovery rates of 65% to 85%, says William S. Dunkin, assistant director of labor-management services at the National Council on Alcoholism, a nonprofit group dedicated to fighting alcoholism. "Employee programs," he says, "are the most promising way of treatment."

The Idea Spreads

They are also growing fast. U.S. companies currently operate over 600 alcoholism programs, Mr. Dunkin says, double the figure five years ago. However, Paul A. Sherman, who directs the counseling program at International Telephone & Telegraph Corp., estimates that because of a lack of management and union support, fewer than 50 of these programs are working well.

Mr. Dunkin says the more effective programs have two big advantages: They can detect alcoholism early and they can force workers to seek treatment. "The most effective motivational factor (in treating alcoholism) is the person's desire to keep his job," he says.

John H. Williams, a counselor who is director of special health services at Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. of New York, says his own successful fight with alcoholism several years ago shows the strength of the motivation to succeed on the job.

"I had been hospitalized several times for liver problems and I was told that I would die if I kept drinking. I still kept drinking," Mr. Williams says. "Time and time again, I was determined to drink only two or three and ended up drinking 10 or 20. By this time, I was also separated from my wife, whom I loved.

"But the real motivation," he says, "came from screwing up on the job (at another company). We were a hot marketing company, and the name of the game was to get the job done. I loved it. My self-image was based on accomplishment."

Number Is Surprising

In reaching alcoholics, the corporate programs are also showing that the employee drinking problem is far greater than many executives believed possible. In Salt Lake City, the 7,300-employee Utah Copper division of Kennecott Copper Corp. says it has reached 660 alcoholic workers since it started an aggressive program five years ago.

Similarly, the 33,000-worker New York City Transit Authority says its 19-year-old alcoholism program, one of the oldest aggressive programs in the country, has handled over 5,000 problem drinkers. The program regularly hospitalizes 175 to 200 workers a year, says Joseph M. Warren, its director. In Peoria, Ill., Caterpillar Tractor Co. revitalized its alcoholism program three years ago and is currently reaching several times as many alcoholics as before, says Dr. John C. Clarno, coordinator of special health services.

The National Council on Alcoholism estimates that at least 6% of all employees nationwide have drinking problems that seriously affect their performance. Each such employee, the council says, costs his company a "conservatively estimated" 25% of his salary in absenteeism, tardiness, spoiled materials and reduced effectiveness.

Of course, employees have personal problems besides alcoholism, and companies have gotten more involved than ever in resolving these troubles, too. Some companies

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have even started to provide psychotherapy on the premises. (See story above.)

But most counseling programs focus on alcoholics, and counselors say that finding them is often the hardest part. Diagnosis can be difficult. Experts say that people who drink heavily, or occasionally get drunk, don't necessarily suffer from alcoholism. (There is by no means unanimity as to just what alcoholism is. One definition is simply a compulsion to drink excessively.) Authorities also say alcoholics generally strive mightily to hide their problem from others and deny it to themselves. Often they succeed. The National Council's Mr. Dunkin observes: "The alcoholic is one individual who doesn't want to be treated for his disease—he is afraid of losing his alcohol."

Instead of instructing bosses to watch for signs of alcoholism itself, counselors like

Mr. Williams and Mr. Sutherland train supervisors to watch for signs of declining performance that don't respond to ordinary managerial reprimands and the like. This is a common symptom of alcoholism, even in its early stages.

Mr. Sutherland finds that alcohol is the main problem for about 60% of his caseload (80% of which is referred by supervisors, with the rest representing voluntary walk-ins). He and his associates usually refer the emotional, marital, financial and drug-related problems to outside specialists.

Counselors use a series of probing questions to discover the alcoholic and make him recognize his problem. For instance, Mr. Sutherland recalls a 35-year-old manager who loathed major assignments and insisted he didn't have a drinking problem. When Mr. Sutherland asked him, "Have you ever had a lapse of memory while drinking?" the manager replied, "Sure, hasn't everybody?"

Mr. Sutherland told the manager that such memory lapses are a typical sign of alcoholism and are rare among non-alcoholics who simply drink a great deal. After further questions, the young manager conceded, "Maybe I do have a problem. My wife thinks I do." He soon entered treatment.

Looking for Lies

Among other things, Mr. Sutherland and other counselors look for any signs of subterfuge or lying about drinking, often symptoms of alcoholism. They commonly ask: Have you ever hidden a bottle? When free liquor is available, do you find you tend to get your share in fast? Have you ever tried to change your drinking pattern, such as swearing off martinis and drinking only beer or wine? (A yes answer to the last question may suggest a vague recognition that a problem may be developing, the counselors say.)

"The first time through, the guy will lie through his teeth," Mr. Sutherland says. So the counselors usually toss in a few questions, involving such things as absenteeism, that have checkable answers. Mr. Sutherland recalls: "Recently I asked a man, 'You know, if I called your wife and asked the same questions about you, do you think I'd get the same answers?' The man just turned white. For the first time in his life, he was running out of places to hide."

While some critics find these methods harsh, counselors claim they are often the only hope of reaching the alcoholic. Once the counselors decide an employee is probably alcoholic, they usually send him to a physician for a double check. On a doctor's advice, many companies send their more serious problem drinkers to residential rehabilitation centers, commonly for about four weeks. These centers usually stress group and individual therapy as well as lectures designed to make the patient understand his drinking problem.

Before rehabilitation begins, some patients are sent to detoxification units of hospitals, usually for about five days. Patients there are withdrawn from alcohol with the aid of a sedative administered in decreasing doses. Detoxification isn't a cure in itself. Trying to come off alcohol "cold turkey" can kill a late-stage alcoholic.

A Role for AA

Whether residential care is needed or not, practically all the aggressive company programs insist on participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, preferably attending "90 meetings in 90 days" to start. Through the highly regarded AA program, over 750,000 Americans are working "one day at a time" to reach or maintain abstinence—still generally considered the only way to arrest the disease. Essentially, participants in AA meetings gain insight and support by listening to other people with similar troubles discuss their drinking, related problems and efforts to cope.

Even the highly regarded programs have numerous tragic failures. One counselor tells of a surgeon who spent six full weeks in a rehabilitation center, left one morning "and was drunk before he got home." Another man completed his stay at a center and hanged himself in his garage two weeks later. (The National Council on Alcoholism says alcoholics have 58 times the suicide rate of non-alcoholics.)

Many critics think the counseling programs represent an alarming corporate involvement in the private lives of employees. Counselors say that it usually takes a special effort, particularly in the early stages, to convince employees that the programs will respect their privacy. Typically, Morgan Guaranty Trust sends a letter to every employee explaining the counseling program and guaranteeing confidentiality. The company's Mr. Williams says he doesn't even tell supervisors what problem an employee has. (Counselors say they usually just indicate whether the employee is cooperating or not.)

Other counselors also say that they consider confidentiality crucial and maintain rigid procedures to insure privacy. So far, breaches of privacy don't seem to be a widespread problem. But even the counselors acknowledge the potential for abuse is significant.